WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

Focus

Drug Labs – The Environmental Toll

Overview

Illegal drug labs encountered by state and local agencies have dramatically increased in the state of Washington – from 38 in 1990 to 789 in 1999. Nearly all of Washington's clandestine drug labs manufacture methamphetamine, which is produced using a combination of hazardous, toxic materials. The Department of Ecology is responsible for handling and disposing of hazardous substances found at illegal lab sites. Ecology works hand-in-hand with many agencies that play a part in the response to drug labs, such as the Washington State Patrol, and local police, health and fire departments.

Drug Labs Threaten Environmental and Public Health

Law enforcement is usually the first agency on scene at a drug lab site. Once officers have gathered evidence and arrested any suspects, Ecology responders work to make the area safe again for the environment and public health. Substances found at drug labs can include acids, sodium hydroxide, flammable solvents, anhydrous ammonia, lithium and sodium metals, and red phosphorus. Some substances can cause injury or death if inhaled or touched enough. A few can react violently if heated, mixed with water or exposed to air. Illegal drug labs also commonly contain contaminated glassware, hypodermic needles and other debris. All these materials must be properly disposed to protect public health and the environment.

Dangers of Pressurized Cylinders and Containers

Ecology responders often encounter pressurized cylinders and containers used to make methamphetamine. Almost any type of sealed container that can hold pressurized gas can be used in a drug lab. Responders have found fire extinguishers, scuba tanks and soda dispensers used to generate hydrogen chloride gas. Anhydrous ammonia, a poisonous and corrosive material, is found in modified propane tanks and large pressurized cylinders. These tanks can be unstable and are difficult to depressurize. The homemade valves can be crudely crafted and corroded. Often the only safe way to vent the tanks is to have law-enforcement officials shoot them with a high-powered rifle under controlled conditions.

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Statewide Drug Lab Activity, 1990-1999

COUNTY	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Adams	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Asotin	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Benton	-	-	-	1	-	1	3	4	7	38
Chelan	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	2
Clallam	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	3	3	-
Clark	5	2	4	1	3	3	12	20	12	16
Columbia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Cowlitz	-	-	3	1	-	1	3	9	2	8
Douglas	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Ferry	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Franklin	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	8
Garfield	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Grant	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	2
Grays Harbor	3	1	-	2	2	1	3	5	5	16
Island	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	2	5
Jefferson	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
King	6	10	2	7	7	10	23	17	48	107
Kitsap	1	1	2	1	-	-	3	-	1	21
Kittitas	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	3
Klickitat	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	1	3	-
Lewis	3	1	1	2	3	4	7	9	31	33
Lincoln	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mason	3	-	-	2	-	-	4	4	10	21
Okanogan	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	2	3	2
Pacific	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	4	1	6
Pend Oreille	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	6	10
Pierce	10	18	18	12	17	17	53	42	129	318
San Juan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Skagit	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	4	2
Skamania	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Snohomish	2	2	-	2	-	-	7	6	5	13
Spokane	-	-	-	-	1	2	1	7	11	36
Stevens	0	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	5
Thurston	1	4	5	4	2	6	25	63	58	86
Wahkiakum	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Walla Walla	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	8
Whatcom	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Whitman	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yakima	3	3	-	2	-	1	5	1	2	12
TOTAL	**38**	**44**	**40**	**42**	**36**	**60**	**153**	**203**	**349**	**789**

**Statewide drug-lab cleanup information was obtained from Ecology's Environmental Reports Tracking System database, contractor cleanup costs and monthly response reports submitted by the agency's regional offices. Some county totals are estimated. Since Ecology also cleans up abandoned drug-lab dumpsites, these figures may be different than those provided by other agencies.*

Ecology Must Reduce Cleanup and Response Costs

Besides the many negative social, health and legal effects surrounding illegal drug use, clandestine labs are also costly and time-consuming to clean up. Meth-lab cleanup costs eat well into the response budget, leaving less for spills of oil and other hazardous materials. As a first step to control costs, Ecology partnered with local hazardous-waste collection facilities and cut transport and disposal costs to the state by $126,000 in 1997. Despite these and other efforts to minimize and control the disposal costs, the department cannot sustain this effort within the current budget. As a result, Ecology has initiated a strategy of cutting overtime costs by working with law enforcement agencies to clean up labs during the day, and using U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency contractors as often as possible, especially in Southwest Washington.

Statewide Drug-Lab Activity

Since 1990, drug labs have been reported in 36 of Washington's 39 counties. While some counties report few labs, some counties along south I-5 have experienced a substantial increase in drug lab activity. Eastern Washington counties are also showing increases, particularly Benton and Spokane counties. This chart outlines statewide drug-lab cleanup activity, county by county, since 1990.*

To Get More Information

For more information regarding Ecology's drug-lab response activities, please contact Steve Hunter at (360) 407-6974 (shun461@ecy.wa.gov).

Ecology is an equal-opportunity agency. If you have special accommodation needs or require this document in alternate format, contact Mariann Cook Andrews at (360) 407-7211 (voice) or (360) 407-6006 (TDD).